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A GLANCE AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION.

BY J. J. BENJAMIN CONSTANT, MEMBER OF THE INSTITUTE OF
FRANCE.

THE collection of Sir Richard Wallace is a gift of specially great value, a truly national boon. As a Frenchman, I may be allowed to regret that this wealthiest of collectors, who lived so long in France and was almost a Parisian, did not leave some part of his collection to the Louvre Museum. Still, England is not far from France, and the trip across the Channel is so short that all who really love painting will surely find time to visit the new gallery. In this connection, I must say that I do not understand why young artists do not more frequently and in greater numbers visit that country of good painting, for in England good paintings are to be seen everywhere. There is not an old family on the walls of whose ancestral home are not to be found a landscape by Constable or Gainsborough, portraits by Reynolds and Lawrence, not to mention numerous examples of Van Dyck.

Through the exhibition of such a collection of masterpieces as is contained in the Wallace gallery, the taste of the public is educated, connoisseurs are made, and the way is prepared for the birth of the great painters of the future.

Let us do justice to the English public, who, despite the national fondness for sports, are nevertheless much interested in the things that pertain to art. It must be some consolation to living artists, who are being so perpetually compared—and not always to their advantage—with the dead, that the English public are as much interested in the present as in the past. It was so in the time of Gainsborough, Reynolds and Sir Thomas Lawrence. At that period, England was waging war all over the continent of Europe, as well as in America; and at such moments, painting is

always somewhat neglected, for painting is essentially an art of peace. But it is more than certain that in England, as elsewhere, the masters did not live an easy life, and found the majority of people indifferent to their art. It is at most but twenty years since a revival of admiration, in which France to some extent shared, began to render justice to the school of English painters of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. In France, landscape painters made some acknowledgment of their indebtedness to the school of 1830 for the two English masters who influenced their work—Gainsborough and Constable. Outside of the landscape painters, Eugene Delacroix, among the historical painters, has left in his correspondence several pages glowing with admiration for Reynolds, Lawrence and Bonnington.

All honor to the dead! The living, however, cannot but feel that, in all countries, the greatest mistake that talent can make is to be contemporary, and that at times the merits of masters who are dead are exaggerated at the expense of those who are still alive. But, after all, that is of little consequence, since a true artist loves his art above all else, and for that reason he finds his reward largely in the happiness which he experiences in its pursuit.

But let us return to that palace of art, the Wallace gallery.

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First of all, I must be permitted to pay my respects to those painters of French grace and gallantry, Watteau, Boucher, Greuze and Prud'hon. Watteau surpasses the others by his cleverness and unerring knowledge, by his warm and delicate coloring. The two large canvases by this master which hang in the Wallace gallery, while very agreeable to look at, are not, however, among his best works, and are not to be compared with the "*Embarquement pour Cythère*" of the Louvre Museum; but the two little panels, "*Gilles et Sa Famille*" and "*La Leçon de Musique*," are gems of art.

Gilles is to the life the strolling player whom every one knows, the impudent, bold amuser of gay society, who, while remaining the professional whose business it is to make the great ones laugh, mocks them without seeming to do so. How keen those eyes are, how insolent, malicious, and full of merry scorn! How nervously are the fingers drawn, how correct is the action! You

can see them run over the strings of the guitar, and lay greedy siege to the purses of his auditors for the little money he needs. With what masterly skill is the clothing painted, and without any exaggeration. In short, it is all living, sensuous, intelligent. No painter has ever better represented the gay, joyous life of careless enjoyment. On all sides, people suffered at that period, they fought many a time and gloriously and in a generous spirit, but without profit; and the happiness of living was but rarely experienced. So, before "*le passer au deluge*," men hastened to fall in love with beautiful women, and to lie at their feet on the greensward of some great park. It was so good to think of nothing, scarcely to dream, to brush the strings of a guitar, to forget one's soul while gazing into beautiful eyes, to hear no longer the boom of cannon in the fields for listening, in the silence of the woods, to the songs of birds at the setting of the sun, or to the light laugh of some gay lady in reply to the burning declarations of a persistent wooer. Watteau was certainly the painter of this amorous and heedless eighteenth century. This sad man—for it would seem that he was really of a melancholy temperament—was the most cheerful of painters, and one who combined great knowledge with the most delicate and clever execution. Watteau will always be the greatest painter of the end of the eighteenth century, and the most truly French.

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By the side of Watteau, Greuze also had grace, but he often descended to the merely pretty, a painter of the boudoir, insipid and affected. One must, indeed, be enthusiastic to admire the young woman, one of his favorite models, who is forever raising her eyes to heaven so as to make them seem larger, with much of the expression of a bleating lamb. The face is rounded to excess, and seems more like soft wax than beautiful, living, rosy flesh! Yet Greuze has painted some remarkable portraits of men—he well understood the great lords of his time. I commend to the admiration of every one those which are to be seen in the Louvre Museum, and which show Greuze in his best light.

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Prud'hon was also a painter of grace, but with classic aspirations toward Beauty. A survivor of the eighteenth century in the first days of the Consulate, dazzled by the rising glory of Bona-

parte, he was one day to become the composer and designer of that art-jewel of Fontainebleau,—the cradle of the little King of Rome. He was one of the most inspired masters of the Empire style, and the exponent of the Græco-Roman transformation of that time which Josephine de Beauharnais had brought into fashion, and which so much influenced the feminine costumes of Malmaison and the Tuileries. The canvases in the Wallace gallery which bear the signature of Prud'hon do honor to French art, but it is still to the Louvre and to the gallery of the Duc d'Aumale at Chantilly that one must go to see this master at his best.

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Let us now pass to the three French masterpieces of the school of 1830—“*Les Sorcières de Macbeth*,” by Corot; “*Marino Faliero*,” by Eugene Delacroix, and “*Le Soleil Couchant dans la Forêt de Fontainebleau*,” by Theodore Rousseau.

In “*Les Sorcières de Macbeth*,” against a greenish sky streaked with red rise the outlines of great oaks. In the depths of their shadows are seen two passing horsemen. The witches are at the left; they have started up with a gesture which seems to say, “Macbeth, thou shalt be king!” All that was merely an excuse for doing a characteristic landscape, an admirable bit of painting, a masterpiece. Never has Corot painted with a broader, richer, more elaborate touch. Never has power been expressed with more facility, more nimbleness of hand. You can hear the leaves rustle. What poetry of Nature is in this never-to-be-forgotten picture. It is executed in a masterly manner, and without any abuse of technique. What a lesson in Art and Painting! Young artists who allow themselves to tire so quickly of composition would do well to pass long hours before Corot’s pictures. This sincere and healthy-minded painter would give of his artistic strength to those morbid ones who are now so much the fashion, to the awkward and pretentious imitators of the early Italians. No one is primitive to-day, so let us remain in our own times and live in the daily apotheosis of Nature.

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Let us now turn to another masterpiece, the “*Marino Faliero*” of Eugene Delacroix. Around a great, light space made by a marble staircase, and in a soft light, a symphony in red and gold, which is occasioned by the presence of the great nobles of Venice

in their gorgeous attire, offers a wonderful arrangement of colors. The reds are kept dull, but here and there a cap of vermillion or orange bursts out like a flower in the sunshine, making an isolated note in the general accompaniment. At the foot of the staircase is a dark, bluish spot; it is an Oriental carpet. Upon this carpet, a headless body clad in a light garment with a great blood-stain, and the executioner as richly dressed as the great lords who surround him, and who have come to witness the delivery of the fatal stroke—all add to the startling effect of barbaric splendor. Into this red symphony comes most appropriately, and just where it should, the touch of resplendent gold in the robe of the Doge, the robe of Marino Faliero, of him who has betrayed the Republic.

All this is grandly depicted with a tragic brilliancy, as should be a Venetian drama of that period of splendor when on the doublet of red brocade the red of blood was invisible. They killed one another in the sunlight in that city of passion, sometimes at night amid the silence of the canals, at the sweet hour of serenades.

Such a subject for romance and its brilliant scenic possibility well suited that ardent colorist, Eugene Delacroix, and he has made a masterpiece from it.

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"Soleil Couchant dans la Forêt de Fontainebleau," by Theodore Rousseau. The sun sinks on the horizon. The day has been warm. The cows are coming to drink. The rays of the setting sun are like red gold among the trees. With these few eternal notes, Theodore Rousseau has chanted a hymn to Nature, which is aflame in a divine transfiguration of evening.

Having drawn the trees one by one in forms absolutely corresponding to their essential character, having drawn the sky and the ground and the cows that are coming to drink, and having drawn it all patiently and lovingly for the sake of supplying himself with a lasting background, Theodore Rousseau has over-shot it with rich, transparent tones that spread all over the landscape, the coloring of precious stones, where the topaz mingles with the opal, the emerald green with the lapis-lazuli, and delicate rose with the fire of the ruby. Never has any one made more masterly use of material so rare. Never has a painter been more of a lapidary in execution. After the brilliant coloring of Eugene

Delacroix, we have the gem-strewn colors of Theodore Rousseau. Let us bow before these two great colorists.

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On going into the great hall, we are attracted, at the left of the entrance, by a medium-sized canvas of Velasquez. It is scarcely rubbed in, being painted with the end of the brush, but with a free boldness which is entirely Spanish. In the distance is seen a Castilian château having somewhat the air of a farm, while in the foreground the young Don Balthazar is training a pony.

In the same room is another example of Velasquez, a portrait of a Spanish lady, and a painting of the highest order. What a richness of material is here, and how well preserved it is.

Thus much being said, I do not wish to overdo my explanation of the beautiful, but would leave to each one the task of discovering it for himself. Let us, however, look at the series of artistic pearls signed Reynolds, Gainsborough, and Thomas Lawrence. These pictures have been engraved by excellent artists, but no reproduction can equal an original. The work of these English painters would inspire even the uncultured with a love of painting. It is large, easy, and suggests a love of Nature. They are never entirely engrossed by the "subject." Even in a composition, the subject is, with the English masters, as well as with true painters of all countries, a mere pretext for a bit of congenial work. They are never absorbed, except in representing life. What is more attractive than this child, with great, shining eyes, holding her dog against her dainty breast, and saying to it, "I love you?" Such sweetness, such candor attracts both the heart and the eyes, and one longs to say to this exquisite baby, "And we, also, we love it, and we love your painter, the great Reynolds."

Apropos of the indifference to "subject," which, in all schools, masters of the true artistic temperament have shown, it may be well to return to it and speak of it in passing.

The colorists, the powerful handlers of *pâte*, have never considered the subject otherwise than as a means of representing life under such and such actions, or such and such aspects, joyful, or sad, or simply plastic.

Rubens in one of his most marvellous pictures, "*L'Enlèvement des Sabines*," which hangs in the National Gallery, did not even take the trouble to dress his Sabines in the costumes of their

day. Without any more ado he dressed them in the style of the seventeenth century. One might rather think it a kidnapping of beautiful Antwerp women on a Flemish fair day. But what difference does it make? He has *made* white shoulders that shine, sumptuous stuffs, warriors with glittering arms—all which is instinct with life, and blazes with the superb coloring of the greatest of Flemish masters.

Thus, the “subject” in Painting is not of great importance. It causes this beautiful art to descend to the level of mere story-telling, of the picture which appeals to the “man in the street.” The crowd gathers before the pictures which depict various kinds of occurrences, before some battle-piece, for instance, of whose correctness it cannot judge, or some dramatic scene of history which may not even represent the facts. But this is of little or no significance. The curiosity of crowds is not based on proper knowledge, and everything in the shape of a figure-piece interests them. They pass by bits of real painting, or subjects treated by true artists, preferring those painters who are mere illustrators.

I must allow myself to tell an anecdote concerning this love of the “subject.” A publisher of prints was once in despair over a certain proof which he was unable to sell. The subject, nevertheless, was one which he had supposed would take well. The engraving depicted a dog and her puppies, in their kennel, being tossed about upon the furious waters of a flood. The publisher’s regular customers commented upon the perilous plight of the poor beasts, but did not buy the print. Then a brilliant idea occurred to the publisher. He requested the artist who had painted the original from which the engraving was made to add to the work a man in a boat, a rescuer, risking his life upon the tumbling waters to save the animals in distress. The change was made by painter and engraver, and forthwith the customers, no doubt reassured as to the fate of the poor animals, bought quite a number of copies.

As often as crowds go to expositions of paintings, they will stop before pictures for the sake of the “subjects,” more or less sentimental, more or less historical, which they represent. But among these crowds there will always be some fastidious ones, some connoisseurs, who will go straight to the good bits of painting, to the true works of art, to the canvases which give the expression or the illusion of life.

Reynolds, Gainsborough, Thomas Lawrence have splendidly achieved the victory of life over death. He still lives, that English admiral who holds the key of Gibraltar in his powerful grasp. Reynolds has perpetuated his victorious gesture, he has preserved his martial and rugged face, with his complexion as red as his coat.

When at Amsterdam, you admire the "*Syndics des Drapiers*," you see the men before you still alive, posing their best for Master Rembrandt, looking at those who are looking at them, and you almost expect them to speak to you. Yes, Rembrandt has stolen them from Death, these worthy men, these fine burghers of Amsterdam, these famous cloth-merchants. And is not this continual resuscitation of the individual by the art of painting one of the miracles of human genius?

This ability of imparting life to their creations was possessed by Reynolds, Gainsborough and Lawrence; they all had it and showed it continually. To be convinced of this you have only to look at the central panel in the Wallace gallery, which is the "Portrait of Nelly O'Brien." Never have coloring and values been managed with more skill and feeling. The reflection of the face is transparent without being thin, and is handled with a full brush. What poetry is there in the soft light that comes from above through the trees. Never has any one represented with more facility and with more accuracy the charm and the grace of the English woman, although Romney has done it occasionally, and Lawrence very often.

But let us turn to the panel directly opposite. Here we see Rembrandt in all his strength, and Velasquez in all his elegance. This work of Rembrandt's certainly belongs to the epoch of his "*Syndics*" and of the "*Ronde de Nuit*." The "*Dame Espagnol*" is of the epoch of "*Las Meninas*," and of the baby Balthazar in the Museum of the Prado at Madrid.

At last, as with everything here below, one becomes tired of admiring, even in this Wallace collection. We shall return to it later, so as not to forget any of the masterpieces which it contains.

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